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AN EXPERIMENT IN HISTORICAL DRAMATIZATION

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In a high school organized on the six-and-six plan as is the Wisconsin High School, the two younger classes make one distinct unit with abilities, interests, and requirements calling for special and careful consideration. In their history work the problem is by no means a simple one, for they are not quite mature enough to attack the more serious work of history which begins with the study of Greek and Roman life in the Freshman year, and yet they have gathered enough during their course in the grades so that the brighter ones of the class have lost their zest for United States history unless it is approached in new ways. One of these ways of approach is by making large use of the dramatic instinct which is strong in children of almost all ages, and may be turned to very effective account at this stage when the children have not yet forgotten how to play with abandon, and at the same time have learned to think and to create to an extent by no means to be despised.

It was with such a group as this that we decided last November to work out a colonial dramatization, and present it as a "benefit" for a needy athletic association. In school matters Our Lady Poverty, wisely honored by the good old St. Francis of Assisi, oftentimes deserves more worship than she gets, since she furnishes the incentive for an exercise of initiative and co-operation on the part of the entire school.

Instead of writing for some of the effective plays already in print, such as those found in *Colonial Plays for the School Room*, by Blanche Shoemaker, we determined to stamp everything "made in Wisconsin," and to keep our expenses as low as possible. We therefore studied simplicity and economy in all our plans. With reluctance we used the "open stage," and our reluctance turned into enthusiasm—for children it is far more effective than screens or curtains. Our costumes were for the most part simple and

home-made. Elaborate staging is assuredly not an essential for this kind of work. We chose for the basis of our play that slender and prosy enough paragraph from our textbooks, known to everyone as "Bacon's Rebellion," but we rechristened it *A Rebel of Olde Virginia*, and the class set to work, under guidance of course, to see what could be done therewith. When the story came out from the larger histories and source books, it proved to be no mean plot for a play. For characters there were the friendly Indians, represented by the Pamunkeys and their Queen Sachem, and the unfriendly Susquehannocks; there was the tyrannous and irascible old Governor Berkeley, grown all the more autocratic from his thirty-odd years of authority in this unshaped land of the west; there were his councilors, subservient or obstinate; there was his young and frivolous wife, whom Bacon called "the very devil of the whole situation"; there was the chivalrous and knightly figure of the impetuous Bacon; and as a foil to him, his practical wife, mistress of the Jamestown inn; and there were messengers, fighting men, and the women of Jamestown who were organized, so the record tells us, into a "White Apron Brigade" by Bacon, and set to march at the head of his returning troops so that the governor's soldiers might not dare to fire at the men behind them—on the whole certainly a very characteristic group of colonials.

For working purposes, after the story in its general outlines had been mastered by the class as a whole, we divided into groups for the three acts and everyone was given some part. The groups then worked out their own lines, planned their own costumes, and determined their own staging. When it was ready at the end of the three weeks' time, it was given by an enthusiastic group of children as "our play," and was apparently much appreciated by the audience of parents, older pupils, and the public in general. We realized a tidy sum for the athletic association, but that was the very least of our profits. The real profits might be enumerated as follows:

1. The children heartily enjoyed every minute of the work. They never seemed to grow tired of thinking out a new line or some new addition of dress or incident—it was *theirs*. They loved it then, they love to look back to it, and they are anxious to try more plays.

2. It made Colonial scenes, days, and characters real and vital to them.

3. It gave them an idea of reality that they can carry into all history. It is *all* past life and is therefore interesting, for nothing that has concerned men is alien or foreign to men, even though they are children. The ability to *see* men and scenes of the historic stage is always an essential for happiness in history work. Altogether a dramatization of this kind, while it takes time and hard work, is one of the most beneficial things that can be done in a seventh- or eighth-grade class, and is well worth all it costs, certainly for one production a year.

For the benefit of the curious the following skeleton of acts and characters of our play, *A Rebel of Olde Virginia*, is added:

ACT I. Around the camp fires of the Pamunkey Indians. Maidens and braves seated. The Queen Sachem comes forth from her wigwam and addresses her people, voicing thankfulness for the peace and plenty they have enjoyed for thirty years. As a sign of their joy, Indian maidens dance about the camp fire. Their dance is interrupted by the entrance of messengers who tell that the white men now are burning the Indian villages, and killing their Indian brothers. The Queen calls for the opinions of her chiefs; some counsel peace, others war. Their speeches are vigorous and full of spirit. The war counsel prevails, and the braves begin their war dance. The act closes with an impressive prayer to the Great Spirit, uttered by the Queen Sachem, in which she implores wisdom and guidance for her people.

ACT II. Council Room of Governor Berkeley. Councilors in white wigs and of grave demeanor sit about the table of state. The Governor proposes an increase of tuppence per pound in the tax on tobacco. Discussion ensues. This proves to be a day of interruption for the council. First the Governor's young wife comes in and demands more money for her vanities. She goes and the Queen of the Pamunkeys comes in to intercede and beg peace for her people. Almost immediately Nathaniel Bacon comes to demand a commission that he may go and fight the Indians. This the Governor does not wish to grant, for he profits greatly in a direct and personal way from the Indian fur trade, and has no desire to see war. But even as he refuses Bacon's request, messengers come running wildly with news of more massacres in the north settlements, and soon the Jamestown mob appears at the door of the Governor's house and demands "A Bacon, A Bacon!" to lead them against the savages. While the Governor counsels peace within, the citizen militia, under Bacon, drills without, and the act closes when they march off for war, leaving the irate Governor still pushing the claims of his "tuppence tax on tobacco" to which he has reverted at every possible interlude throughout the act.

ACT III. This opens with a domestic scene between the old Governor and his young wife, waited upon by their light-footed maid, at a tea-drinking. This is interrupted by the arrival of Bacon's army from the north with the White Apron Brigade marching at its head. There is a stormy encounter between Bacon's soldiers and the soldiers of the Governor. Berkeley marches out between the armies, and pointing to Bacon, exclaims: "The time has come to choose between that traitor and me. If you choose him, 'fore God here is a fair mark! Shoot!" Bacon, however, bids his men shoot, not at the white-haired Governor, but at the soldiers and councilors whose support makes the Governor's stand possible. The women drop to their knees and guns are leveled, when the white handkerchief of surrender is waved. The Governor yields to Bacon's demands for recognition and reinstatement for himself and his men. The play closes as the real history is said to have closed, on July 4, 1676, just one hundred years, to the day, before the Declaration of Independence, with Progress and Justice in the person of Bacon triumphant. The later and sadder scenes of the real history, in which Governor Berkeley reverts to his tyranny and finally has to flee, Bacon burns Jamestown and then meets an early death from fever and weakness due to exposure, and the old Governor returns in full power with none powerful enough to say him nay, were not carried out because they were not suitable for the purposes of the children. In celebration of their rejoicing, soldiers, women, Bacon, Lady Berkeley, Mrs. Bacon, and Governor Berkeley join in the Virginia reel, and those in the reel in turn become spectators, while as a climax to the play two couples dance the ever stately and attractive minuet.